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NEW YORK TIMES
27 May 1986

Security Official Focus of Debate In Israeli Furor

By THOMAS L. FRIEDMAN

Special to The New York Times

JERUSALEM, May 26 — The Attorney General of Israel has asked the police to examine evidence that the head of the domestic intelligence organization covered up the involvement of his agency in the beating deaths of two Palestinian bus hijackers two years ago, Israeli officials and press reports said today.

The Attorney General's request for an investigation was made two weeks ago. It was said to have been accompanied by evidence collected against Avraham Shalom, the head of the Shin Beth, the domestic security service that is the equivalent of the Federal Bureau of Investigation.

However, the request by Attorney General Yitzhak Zamir came to light only in the last two days, as pressure increased from Cabinet ministers led by Prime Minister Shimon Peres to block the Attorney General's moves and prevent a police inquiry. Opponents of an inquiry maintained that it would be harmful to Israeli security and efforts to combat terrorism.

Previous Investigations

The state television said the proposed investigation may concern an order that may have been given to kill the two Palestinian hijackers after they were captured alive by Israeli troops.

Previous Israeli investigations into the bus affair concluded that the two hijackers were killed as a result of wounds suffered when Israeli troops stormed the bus in the Gaza Strip early on the morning of April 13, 1984, and in a later interrogation in which the two were beaten for information.

The majority of both the Likud and Labor ministers in the Cabinet were united against the Attorney General's plans for an investigation, so there appeared to be little chance that the affair could topple the Government.

However, Israeli political commentators said that an investigation of the Shin Beth chief would be an extremely messy affair that could lead to a chain of resignations in the intelligence community.

The Minister of Police, Haim Bar-Lev, said in a television interview today that the "police investigation has not yet begun" and that the delay had been coordinated with the Attorney General. Mr. Bar-Lev said the delay was designed to enable Prime Minister Peres and the Cabinet to persuade the Attorney General not to investigate one of Israel's most senior intelligence officers.

The power struggle between Mr. Peres's Cabinet and the Attorney General appears to have raised some basic questions about the commitment of Israeli politicians to the principle of equal treatment under the law for all, officials said.

Throughout the day the Cabinet ministers reiterated that investigating the head of the Shin Beth would damage Israel's security, but they made no mention of the gravity of the accusations against the intelligence chief that prompted the Attorney General to call for an inquiry.

Attorney General Is Independent

In Israel, the Attorney General has the full and totally independent legal powers to prosecute anyone he deems fit. However, Mr. Peres and his ministers contend that they have the right to try, through persuasion, to prevent the investigation. They say their efforts do not constitute interference in the legal process.

"The police are handling this affair in the same manner that they handle any request by the Attorney General," said Mr. Bar-Lev. "When you say pressure on the Attorney General, what do you mean? If someone is trying to influence someone, is that pressure? Let's suppose that the Government or the ministers are trying to influence the Attorney General, to persuade him. Is that pressure? Why is it called pressure?"

"The Attorney General thinks that certain matters should be investigated; some of the ministers think that there should not be an investigation," Mr. Bar-Lev added. "In my eyes that isn't pressure. It is legitimate persuasion. After all, we are talking about a security affair, an affair of national importance."

Despite the apparent pressure being put on him, Attorney General Zamir has refused to back down. The issue, he said today, "is law, not security."

Censorship Limits Reporting

The behavior of Prime Minister Peres and his Cabinet has struck many Israelis as highly unusual. The Cabinet has prevented, through military censorship, any public discussion of the accusations against the Shin Beth chief or of the potential damage to security that prosecuting him might cause. It was only through the reporting of foreign correspondents that the basic outlines of the story emerged for the Israeli public.

In addition, Mr. Peres announced today that he would not appear before the Parliament's Legal Committee to explain the affair or allow Attorney General Zamir, who reports to Mr. Peres, to appear either.

The Citizens Rights Movement announced that it would introduce a parliamentary motion of no confidence in the Government on Tuesday, arguing that "the behavior of the Prime Minister and his ministers in this affair has brought their commitment to the rule of law in Israel down to a new low."

Newspapers Condemn Peres

All of Israel's leading newspapers, including the conservative ones, condemned Prime Minister Peres today for, as the daily Maariv put it, political interference in the legal process "under the pretext of 'security considerations.'"

The newspaper Haaretz added: "The Prime Minister must not condone such intervention on a false pretext, as though security considerations could make it justifiable for Israel to cease to be a law-abiding state, even in one single case."

From the little that is known, it appears that Mr. Shalom, the Shin Beth chief, who reports directly to Prime Minister Peres, is being investigated because he has been accused of aiding in a cover-up of the involvement of the Shin Beth in the beating to death of two Palestinians who hijacked an Israeli bus near Ashkelon on April 12, 1984. Yitzhak Shamir was Prime Minister when the incident took place.

Brig. Gen. Yitzhak Mordechai, the chief paratroop officer, was in charge of the forces that stormed the bus, rescued the passengers, and killed two of the four hijackers in the assault.

Several senior Shin Beth officials and security men also took part in the rescue and in the beating and interrogation of the two hijackers who were captured alive.

The question of whether there had been a cover-up by the Shin Beth seems to have come to light because several senior officials of the organization believed very strongly that its basic integrity had been threatened by what they considered to be improper behavior by senior Shin Beth officials.

According to Haaretz, several months ago the Attorney General obtained materials implicating the Shin Beth chief in "grave violations." This material, the newspaper said, was obtained from three people in the organization. Two of the officials had been dismissed and the third had been given special terms of resignation, the newspaper said. Last Friday, one of those dismissed took legal action against the Government, asserting that he had been dismissed for giving the Attorney General materials "prejudicial to his superior," Haaretz said.